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Regrettable indeed

"The American Justice Department statement on the Klaus Barbie affair, albeit frank, leads us to deplore the practices it reports."

These words by a French government spokesman are about as temperate as could be expected from a nation whose system of justice has been thwarted by another nation's military spies.

At least the United States has now, more than 30 years late, offered regrets for its responsibility in delaying the due process of law. It admits openly what many had long suspected, that it helped former Gestapo officer Barbie escape French prosecution for monstrous war crimes. Army officials allegedly lied even to their own country's civilian authorities while using Barbie in anticommunist espionage activities.

Earlier this year Barbie was expelled from his haven in Bolivia and imprisoned in France. Justice at last will be allowed to take its course in France.

What about the United States?

The investigation ordered by the Reagan administration comes after potential defendants have reached the legal protection of the statute of limitations. The official in charge of the investigation calls the US recruitment of Barbie defensible in the cold war atmosphere of the time. Whether the American people consider it defensible is something for them to make known to their government now that they have been given a report on the matter.

The government, for its part, can clear the air further by thoroughly addressing the doubts of observers that the Barbie episode was an isolated instance of US operations with, or aid for, Hitler's henchmen.

As for the future, it is essential to ensure that all US intelligence agencies work together under firm administrative and ethical leadership to prevent any equivalent of the Barbie affair, with its allegations of deception within the government itself. President Nixon saw a need for coordinating the military and civilian intelligence agencies, although he soon dropped the notorious plan for uniting them in illegal activities against US citizens. Subsequent investigations of US intelligence stressed the importance of accountability to the highest levels. Governmental steps were taken along these lines.

Yet just last spring the New York Times cited officials and other sources on a special military intelligence unit that had been operating since 1980. For nearly a year it was said to have conducted clandestine operations without the legal authorization — or even awareness of its existence — required by Congress. At that time, according to one source, the CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency were unaware of the secret unit's operations, except possibly "in very vague terms."

There is no room for vagueness in an intelligence system of the high effectiveness demanded for the eyes and ears of freedom.